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AUTHOR	Reilly, Dennis M.
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ABSTRACT

One of 52 theoretical papers on school crime and its relation to poverty, this chapter states that youthful vandalism is a multidetermined problem that has its roots not simply in the personality of the vandal but also in interaction with peer, family, and community systems. The costs of vandalism are noted, and various intrapsychic and sociocultural theories of causation are reviewed. A general theory of delinquency is proposed, that emphasizes the central role of the family as the mediating system between the individual and society. Finally, a model is proposed for dealing with vandalism that includes school-based prevention, the principle of personal reparations, family therapy, and recommendations for broader social changes. (Author/MLF)

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COPING WITH VANDALISM IN FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY

Dennis M. Reilly
SNG (Southeast Nassau Guidance)
Counseling Center

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ABSTRACT

Youthful vandalism is a multi-determined problem which has its roots not simply in the personality of the vandal but also in interaction with peer, family, and community systems. The costs of vandalism are noted, and various intrapsychic and sociocultural theories of causation are reviewed. A general theory of delinquency is proposed, which emphasizes the central role of the family as the mediating system between the individual and society. Finally, a model is proposed for dealing with vandalism, one that includes school-based prevention, the principle of personal reparations, family therapy, and recommendations for broader social changes.

Introduction

Youthful vandalism is no longer, if it ever was, a laughing matter. Over recent years it has grown to be a nationwide multimillion dollar problem. In cities, suburbs, and rural areas public and private property is destroyed at an alarming rate, with schools, churches, private homes, offices, parks, libraries, and public transport all falling prey to repeated acts of destructiveness.

But the financial loss, the skyrocketing insurance premiums, and the cost to taxpayers tell far less than the whole story. There is also an enormous human cost. The victim of vandalism experiences a sense of having been singled out by an unkind fate, a heightened sense of vulnerability, of not being safe even on his own ground; there is a sense of impotent rage and a desire for revenge, a sense of having been raped and violated, but often, as most vandals are never caught, without a specific target of blame. The victim of vandalism becomes more alienated from his neighbors and society, more fearful and powerless to influence his own life, more at the mercy of chaotic outside forces, and more hostile and suspicious towards strangers, especially young people.

And then there are the costs to the vandal himself.

For some, an act of vandalism may bring feelings of shame, guilt, and a heightened inadequacy. Others may feel no regrets but they risk, if apprehended, disciplinary action, criminal labeling and stigmatization, and a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the act of vandalism becomes the first tentative step in a delinquent career. Finally, there is a risk that what begins as a "prank" or "malicious mischief" can quickly escalate, intentionally or not, into something far more serious, i.e., assault or homicide.

Etiology

What are the causes of vandalism? Most of us can at least understand, though not condone, vandalism that is clearly prompted by a revenge motive, as when a youth slashes the auto tires of a teacher who has punished him. But how does one explain the vast majority of vandalistic acts which appear wanton, irrational, unprovoked, and gratuitous?

The literature on vandalism per se is sparse and has usually been subsumed under general works on delinquency. Theories of causation may be grouped as follows:

Intrapsychic

Such theories tend to locate the source of the problematic behavior primarily "within" the youth, within

his psyche. They appeal to concepts such as "castration anxiety," "identification with the aggressor," and "displacement." Vandalism and other forms of delinquency may be seen as examples of "superego defects"; as attempts to forge a "negative identity" by identification with an antisocial peer group; as attempts to resolve "autonomy/dependency" conflicts relating to one's parents; as ways of overcoming feelings of "impotency" via "masculine display"; or as "displacements" of anger felt towards parents onto other, less threatening targets. Many reviews of such theories can be found in the literature (Halleck, 1972; Martin & Fitzpatrick, 1968), and many researchers have contributed to the field (Aichorn, 1966; Blos, 1962; Erickson, 1968; Lampl-de-Groot, 1949; McCord & McCord, 1956).

Sociocultural

These theories seek the origins of vandalism and other delinquent behavior not so much in the offender as in the social or cultural environment. Thus, "vindictive vandalism" may be seen as a product of interpersonal and intergroup conflict (Martin, 1961). Martin and Fitzpatrick (1968) provide an excellent review of many of these theories. Taft (1956), for example, sees American culture as

"crimineogenic" in its emphasis upon materialism, impersonality, in-group loyalties, and the "frontier virtues." Adult criminal role-models often set a poor example for young people (Clinard, 1949). America may have a set of "subterranean values" which covertly endorses hedonism and lawbreaking (Matza & Sykes, 1961).

Ethnic and class conflicts, opposing subcultures, and cultural "marginality" may produce antisocial life-styles (Stonequist, 1937; Sellin, 1938). Delinquent and gang behavior may substitute for formal rites of passage in our society (Bloch & Niederhoffer, 1958). In a culture which stresses "winning" over how one "plays the game," blocked opportunities can cause young people to seek success via illicit means (Merton, 1957; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960).

Delinquent behavior can be seen as learned behavior, learned from one's "reference group" through "differential association" or "identification" with delinquent peers (Sutherland & Cressey, 1955; Glaser, 1956). Being "labeled" and "stigmatized" as a delinquent can reinforce one's negative self-image and close off legitimate roads to success (Tannenbaum, 1938).

"Middle-class delinquency" might be on the rise because certain "antisocial," "lower-class" values may be

inflitrating upward" to middle-class youth, partially due to media influences (Kvaraceus & Miller, 1959), or because the upwardly mobile "nouveau bourgeoisie" have attained middle-class economic status without having renounced their previous values (Bohlke, 1961).

The mass media may exert a powerful criminogenic influence (Wertham, 1953). Media violence, or the nightly news of Vietnam, our "television war," may have helped condition young people to destructiveness as a way of life. One might claim that social controls no longer function adequately in our anomic society; or that the "vandalism" and pollution of our environment and the manipulation and exploitation of our institutions by officials at the highest levels of government has set a bad example for young people. Finally, a case could be made that vandalism represents a rudimentary revolutionary impulse, a desire to "smash the state" via a blundering attack on property which symbolizes one's feelings of alienation, expropriation, powerlessness, and oppression.

Familial

With the emergence of family therapy theory and technique in the past two decades, a whole new perspective on delinquency has emerged. Family therapy sees vandalism,

delinquency, or any other "symptom" or problematic behavior not simply as residing in the "designated patient" or "sympton-bearer." Rather, it is seen as a product of disturbed family communications, relationships, and behavior. Paradoxical family communication and double-bind messages are etiologic to schizophrenia and forms of delinquency (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1956).

Families may need a delinquent family scapegoat (Haley, 1963). In families with delinquent children, the parents are often "overtly punitive and repressive but covertly permissive and seductive" (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). Many "low-class" urban families were found to offer "implicit as well as explicit training and socialization in delinquency" (Minuchin, Montalvo, Guerney, Rosman, & Schumer, 1967; Minuchin, 1974). Delinquency may be a collusive family endeavor (Bell, 1975), with children acting out "a latent delinquent attitude in the parents" (Skynner, 1976).

Specific delinquent family patterns have been tentatively isolated (Stabenau, Tupin, Werner, & Pollin, 1965). The delinquent may be acting out the parents' delinquent fantasies and embodying their disowned badness, providing them with both vicarious gratification and expiation of guilt and punishment "by proxy" (Johnson & Szurek, 1952).

The delinquent may thus be the parents' delegate," sent out by them on a delinquent "mission" to bring back "vicarious thrills"; the child must provide the parents with the excitement they missed when they were adolescents (Stierlin, 1974).

Delinquents are family black sheep and scapegoats, who are "loyal traitors," fulfilling "a negative loyalty commitment" to their families. The delinquency may serve as the family's "signal" to the outside world that the family itself needs help. The seeming "culprit" is actually a "devoted" child paying a "loyalty debt" to his family in a delinquent currency (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973). Thus, though family therapy is an incredibly diverse field with many conflicting schools (Ferber, Mendelsohn, & Napier, 1973; Foley, 1974), there is widespread agreement on the collusive nature of deviant behavior within the family (Framo, 1972; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Framo, 1969).

Clinical Experience

> The fathers have eaten unripe grapes; and the childrens' teeth are set on edge. Ezekiel, 18:2

Our own clinical experience with hundreds of adolescents at Southeast Nassau Guidance Counseling Center

has convinced us that a strong familial factor exists in most cases of middle-class vandalism. It should be noted that these findings are based upon work with over-whelmingly white, middle- to lower middle-class families. This population reflects the demography of our catchment area, a suburban Long Island locale within short communiting distance of New York City. The extent to which our findings can be generalized either to "lower-class," to urban, or to nonwhite groups is debatable.

Through our daily treatment contacts with troubled adolescents and their families, we were able to construct a tentative profile of a family system which tends to produce behavior problems such as vandalism and drug abuse (Reilly, 1975a, 1975b) in its children. We found that a constellation of affective, behavioral, and relational themes dominate the surface interactions in families of youthful vandals. Although these themes are found to some extent in almost all families, our client families carried them to pathological extremes. Among these themes were:

Negativistic Interaction

Many families of youthful vandals share a common problem. Each family member feels encapsulated, separated

from the rest by a yawning emotional gulf. When they do communicate, it is primarily in negative ways. They rarely have anything good to say about one another, finding it much easier to criticize or complain than to praise or express affection. Good behavior is ignored, whereas bad behavior unfailingly gets attention. Children soon learn that "the squeaky wheel gets the oil," that the only way to get attention is to be bad. Consequently, the bad behavior of children from such families -- such as vandalism -- often represents a bid for attention from a world they have learned will ignore them unless they "cause trouble" or "raise hell." Even if it means being punished, some attention is better than none. When life at home is dull, deadened, lifeless, shallow, and affectless, any affective display, no matter how negative, becomes a powerful reinforcer for deviant behavior.

Difficulty with Limits

Parents in such families appear incapable of setting consistent limits upon their childrens' behavior. Either they fail to punish bad behavior at all, punish it at times but reward or ignore it at others, or split over whether and/or how to discipline. In any case, the youth gets a very confused and mixed message concerning what is right and wrong.

A "Cry for Help"

The youth's subsequent confusion concerning moral standards often leads him to provoke limits via acting out (e.g., committing acts of vandalism) in order to know where he stands. He is frequently unconsciously motivated to flaunt his vandalism in order to invoke parental attention and concern, and to provoke the imposition of external controls upon his impulses and behavior. Thus, he may arrange to get caught in an act of vandalism by increasing the frequency or maximizing the risks of arrest during the acts, until he is eventually apprehended.

Parental Denial

Parents in such families tend to deny both their own and their childrens' problems, managing not to see them, often until outside authorities are forced to intervene. In the meantime, as the youth escalates his attempts to get caught, they often escalate their denial. Even when forced to face the indisputable fact of the child's arrest, they will frequently protest, "it can't be my child!"

Vicarious Parental Behavior

Parents in such families may get a sort of second-

hand gratification or thrill from their child's vandalism and other acting-out behavior. In such cases, children are really acting out their parents' unconscious impluses and wishes. Parents of chronic youthful vandals often have as little respect for their neighbors' property or for public property as do their children. They may be suspicious and hostile, even paranoid, toward people outside the family. They consciously or unconsciously convey these attitudes to their children who, through vandalism, merely make concrete their parents' hostility toward the outside world. Parents in such families tend to rationalize or try to justify their childrens' vandalism, dismissing it as youthful prankishness or saying that the victim "had it coming."

Powerlessness and Identify - Diffusion

Since members of such families rarely listen to or pay attention to one another, each feels an overriding sense of powerlessness, an inability meaningfully to affect other people or events. Each feels like a nobody, a nonperson. Young people in these families often try to compensate for their sense of powerlessness by affiliating themselves with a tough and aggressive peer group or gang, one that will give them at least the illusion of identity and potency. Vandalism may represent an attempt by such

youngsters, (and their groups) to prove to themselves and to others that they are persons, that they do wield power of a sort.

Difficulties Concerning Anger

People in such families can rarely handle anger well. Because family members feel so deprived of love, warmth, and affection, their rage is enormous. But expression of anger, like expression of love, is seen as dangerous in these families. As a result, the anger is repressed and only gains expression in an indirect manner. The young person may, for example, displace anger toward ungiving parents onto police, teachers, neighbors, etc. Vandalism may be a convenient vehicle of expression. The anger may also be turned inward, resulting in behavior which involves chronic self-defeat, getting caught and punished, poor self-image, masked depression, etc. Or the child may act out this anger with a "passive/aggressive" motive--for example, the vandal may arrange to be caught in the hope that this will spite and severely embarrass the parents.

Inappropriate Parental Expectations

When parents expect too much of their children, when they make love conditional upon perfection and success,

youthful vandalism can often serve as a means of rebelling against the unrealistic expectations. On the other hand, when parents' expectations are too low, when they expect and predict failure and bad behavior on the part of their offspring, vandalism may represent the youth's way of fulfilling parents' prophecy, a way of "living down to" their expectations and "giving them what they want."

Parental Need for "Problem - Children"

Some parents almost seem to need and to want their children to become "toublemakers." The children seem to be following negative life-scripts written by their parents, often even before their birth, calling for their command performance in the roles of "black sheep," "the family scapegoats," and "the rotten apples." The parents seem to have a strong unconscious investment in their children becoming or remaining behavior problems. The childrens' problems serve a vital role in maintaining the family homeostasis or balance. The problem child may help to "save" a failing marriage by diverting attention from marital discord, thus becoming the sacrificial lamb on the altar of the parents' troubled relationship. A parent may need the child to "have a problem" which acts out the parent's own disowned impluse, thus allowing the

parent to participate vicariously in the excitement. And sometimes the parent needs the youth to be problematic so that he or she will always remain a failure, forever tied to and dependent upon the parents. Such a parent prefers a failure who never leaves home to a success who abandons the parents in their "empty nest." In any case, vandalism, like any symptomatic behavior in a family is collusive, and serves to equilibrate the family system.

A General Theory of Delinquency

As we have seen, many theories have been advanced to help explain delinquent acts such as vandalism, ranging from the intrapsychic to the familial to the sociocultural. We believe that a family systems approach offers the best explanatory value and provides us with the best guidelines for formulating effective treatment interventions.

The interface between the individual and his society is most visible in the family. The family is the fulcrum, the pivot - point, the interpreter, and the mediator between its members and their culture. As such, the family is particularly influential in the socialization of its members, whether into prosocial or into antisocial roles. It is a semipermeable membrane which may admit, not admit, or regulate the flow of either prosocial or delinquent influences from the outside world of peers,

class and group interests, media, social values, etc. It is a social lens mechanism which may either selectively magnify and focus criminogenic influences upon its individual members, or screen and filter them out.

It is the disturbed family system which creates in its individual members (the "identified patients" or "symptom-bearers") a vulnerability to antisocial influences coming from delinquent peers, media, or the general culture. It is the disturbed family system's need for a delegated family black sheep, scapegoat, or deviant which makes a young person particularly susceptible to the adoption of delinquent values and behavior. It is the disturbed family system which pushes the black sheep into the arms of a delinquent peer group. This helps explain why one young person may choose "differential association" with a delinquent peer group, while another chooses a prosocial one. Finally, it is the disturbed family system which "nominates" the delinquent and "elects" him to his scapegoat office; although he appears intrapsychically disturbed, the problem is not so much in his head as it is between him and his fellow family members, and between them and their society.

Of course, the family does not exist in a vacuum.

It is, in its turn, molded by society and by social influences such as class, ethnicity, mass media, and government policy. But the family, as the central mediating force between person and culture, deserves a central role in all efforts at crime control. It is, after all, the one social institution which confers both personhood and personality upon its members, making them who they are, while simultaneously socializing them in the values of their subculture and the larger society.

Intervention

As we have seen, the causes of vandalism and other forms of delinquency can be found only if we examine intrapsychic, intrafamilial, and sociocultural factors in reciprocal interaction, with a special emphasis upon the family system as the point of convergence where the vectoring forces meet.

Consequently, any attempt to prevent or control vandalism and other delinquent behaviors must proceed on several levels, must utilize a multimodal approach, and must offer the real possibility of effecting meaningful family system change.

Specifically, in the case of vandalism, four levels of intervention are recommended:

School-Based Prevention

This allows for intervention at the peer-group level. In schools and communities in which there is a significant vandalism problem, small group discussions could address the issue. Such discussions of vandalism would be incorporated as naturally as possible into ordinary classroom and "rap group" routine. It would be one of many issues discussed as a matter of course in health or guidance classes, social studies classes, etc. The focus of such discussions would be the students' reactions to and feelings about vandalism. What do they see as the motivations behind vandalism? Is it wrong? If so, how should it be handled? What can they do to help?

Groups could be helped to redefine vandalism as an unproductive and self-defeating attempt to resolve feelings of anger, powerlessness, inferiority, unlovableness, etc. Alternative and more positive ways of handling such feelings could be suggested by the group. Students could be shown that the antisocial acts of the few often provoke unwelcome blanket retaliation by adult authorities against all students and that the "money spent for property repairs means money lost for pleasurable extras" (Evans, 1977), such as recreational equipment, popular special courses,

etc. Older students could be engaged by requesting their help in reaching younger students with the message, thus offering them a meaningful role with age/grade status appeal (Niven and Schiro, 1977).

Attempts could be made to address the issue of civic responsibility early--in kindergarten through grade six--and to convey a "cognitive and affective understanding" of what it means (Evans, 1977). The problem of vandalism need not even be addressed directly; rather an indirect approach could be used. For example, as part of a biology assignment, a pupil might be asked to report on the effects of a vandal's damage to a "Magnolia tree on the school grounds"; furthermore, children can be helped to "think about the aftermath of their acts," of "how other people feel when they come along to use the equipment and find it damaged or destroyed" (Evans & Altman, 1977). In any case, the effectiveness of changing peer-group attitudes toward vandalism must not be underestimated.

Personal Reparations

The ability to empathize with one's fellow human beings is of prime importance to social relationships and good mental health (Paul, 1975; Katz, 1963; Chessick, 1965). The absence of a capacity for empathy, the inability

to put onself in another's shoes, is a major factor in criminal behavior (Ullmann & Krasner, 1969; Freyhan, 1955; Yochelson & Samenow, 1976). In our experiences with the families of youthful vandals, we find that the family atmosphere tends to create, over time, a variable insensitivity to the needs and feelings of others, not only within the family but outside it as well. Therefore, we feel that the most effective rehabilitative approach would be one which, by its very nature, maximizes the opportunity for the vandal to learn the capacity for empathy. For this reason, we strongly endorse a personal reparations program for apprehended vandals.

If such a program is to work, vandalism must first of all be taken seriously. Police should be consistently and immediately involved when an act of vandalism occurs. If the damage is minor, a police station adjustment could be negotiated between the aggrieved party, the vandal, and the vandal's parents, in which the youth is offered the opportunity to seek counseling and to make informal reparations to the victim (be that victim an individual or an institution) in lieu of court involvement. The vandal could work off his debt via in-kind reparative services to his victim. This would compel the offender to take personal responsibility for the offense and allow vandal and victim the opportunity to establish a personal

face-to-face relationship.

In those cases where the damage is heavy and court involvement is indicated, personal reparations and counseling could be made conditions of probation or conditional release. Such an arrangement is in marked contrast to reliance upon the judicial system alone in vandalism cases. Court involvement is rarely helpful or satisfactory either to the victim or the offender. Even if a victim succeeds in bringing the offender to court, the case is not always proved. Even when it is, the victim has been subjected to long delays and aggravation during the court process and, in the end, generally comes away with the feeling that the offender's sentence was too light.

Court proceedings rarely compel the offender to make any direct personal reparations to the victim; if any reparations at all are made it is generally by the offender's parents or by an insurance company. Worse, the usual court proceedings rarely allows victim and offender to meet except as adversaries, thus inhibiting any hope of their being able to understand each others' feelings or motivations. Finally, the judicial system's most drastic remedy for juvenile crime -- institutionalization -- rarely rehabilitates and more often "dehabilitates,"

releasing youth with new intramurally - acquired criminal skills.

On the other hand, giving the offender the option of making personal reparation to the victim (repairing a fence he has damaged, painting over frafitti on a school wall, cutting the victim's lawn weekly to pay for a broken car windshield, etc.), allows the victim direct compensation. The offender must make a personal contract with the victim, under police, probation, or social agency supervision and monitoring, to arrange a way fairly to work off the debt. It allows victim and offender the chance to get to know one another, perhaps to develop mutual empathy, and to see one another as real human beings with real needs and emotions rather than simply as stereotyped adversaries from "two different worlds."

Naturally, such an arrangement would have to be "sold" to a target community; police, school personnel, and residents would have to be convinced of its wisdom by careful presentation and demonstration projects. But its advantage is that it appeals to widely - held American values -- hard work, personal responsibility for one's acts, and the idea that the "punishment should fit the crime."

A Family Therapy Program

Since disturbed family relationships are usually

prominent in the etiology of vandalism, involvement in a course of conjoint or multiple family thereapy is highly indicated for the families of identified youthful vandals. Generally, such thereapy can be profitably time-limited to approximately 15 sessions as a way of motivating the family to maintain a goal-directed focus (Lewin, 1970; Sifneos, 1972; Mann, 1973).

In the initial sessions an effort is made to redefine the "patient" as the family and the way it interacts, thus removing the youthful vandal's label as "the sick one" (Bowen, 1969) in the family. The therapist then attempts to help the family modify its characteristically destructive surface interactions. The ways in which the family clues acts of vandalism are explored, and the family is helped to improve communication skills, especially with regard to coping with anger and expressing affection. They are taught to praise and reward positive behavior and helped to abandon their tendency to reinforce negative behavior with attention. Empathetic responses are continuously modeled, evoked, and reinforced. Parents are helped to gain insight into their own need for their children to be symptomatic black sheep or scape-goats; they are encouraged to examine their marriage and their relationships with their own parents and families of origin for clues concerning their collusive reinforcement

of the delinquent behavior. Finally, the issue of termination and separation from the therapist is discussed, and the therapist expresses a strong sense of confidence in the family's ability to function on its own.

We have found this modality to be very effective with vandals, drug abusers, and other delinquent youth treated at our center. A comprehensive and in-depth discussion of this treatment approach is available in a previous publication (Reilly, 1975b).

Broader Social Changes

Even if one grants the central mediating role of the family in either fostering or preventing delinquency, the question arises as to how we can best modify societal forces impinging upon the family so as to produce prosocial family orientations rather than criminogenic families. School-based discussion groups, personal reparations, and family therapy programs are all well and good and are all likely to be fairly successful in middle-class neighborhoods. We would suspect, however, that both their practicality and their effectiveness would be extremely limited in low-income and slum areas.

This is not to say that they are not worth trying. However, more effective in the long run would be an end to government policies which systematically destroy family

life among the poor, such as welfare policies which place a premium on broken homes or which discourage attempts at self-sufficiency. A massive civilian national service program could be designed to provide young people with socially useful employment and training, and with a visible and meaningful rite of passage to adult status. When we do not allow the young and the poor a stake in society, we cannot expect them to manifest a highly developed sense of civic responsibility or of respect for other people's property. Nor can one rightfully expect the family for whom every day represents a struggle for survival to develop in its members a finely honed capacity for empathy.

Of course, abolishing poverty would not abolish crime; crime and delinquency still exist in the comfortable middle-class suburbs. But it would, over a period of generations, at least reduce the sheer quantity of "lower-class crime" now so prevalent, and it would render the remainder more receptive to traditional middle-class treatment approaches such as those described herein.

Conclusion

In this report, we have examined many of the prevailing theories concerning vandalism and other forms of antisocial behavior. In our opinion, vandalism and delinquency

are multidetermined phenomena. They are produced by the interaction of intrapsychic, intrafamilial, and sociocultural forces, with the family system playing a central mediating role. Therefore, their prevention and control demand many different levels of intervention, all designed to strengthen the family in its prosocial role while diminishing its potential criminogenic influence.

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